

Hello -- Harold Briggs

by Harry Roskolenko

Harold Briggs, the bookseller, soon became Briggs the poet when I first met him at the age of twenty-one. Then he was a book-scout seeking vintage Americana. He talked to me about the First World War, poetry, radicalism, social problems -- circa 1928 -- and it all took place in front of the two stone lions at the main library in New York.

He died forty-one years later. A friend wrote to me in Australia ... and as I read the letter on Melbourne's Collins Street, I cried for the man, the good friend, the laughing poet; the man with the pipe and the small cigars; the Irishman who was an internationalist and who helped finish off some of the bottles at the parties in my high walk-up flat on Sixth Avenue; the whimsical poet who saw in poetry another illusive key to man's social and ambivalent salvation; the testy radical, who belonged and did not belong, later; who had helped to lead the Bonus March on Washington-- when marching and picketing and radicalism were something essential and meaningful; who saw the world often as I saw it -- and did not, the next day; with whom I differed, politically and we still had a drink, from coffee to grog, the next day; with whom many Irish-Jewish dialogs took place on the natural absurdity of man, some of his machines, most of his purposes -- and where he would, without too many doubts, end up the next year

We had known many causes together, with red flags, green flags, blue flags; but it was, essentially, literature-- and that currently bastard art, poetry. Then poetry had a known family and an inheritance. We knew its parents. We were, after our fashion, its offsprings -- writing for thick and small little magazines as poets, critics, kibitzers -- to add more than the tokens of rhetoric to the times of our youth.

Books N' Things, Briggs' mellow bookshop, was a smoky place to rendezvous for thousands of non-genteel conversations... and then I bought a book for a buck or a magazine for a quarter, from the carefully spread dusty shelving and skeletal racks. The books and magazines were catholic, in an atheistic way--Poetry of all the schools, before Barbarism, 1970 style, took over the WORDS of literature and alleged social protest. The bookshop gave me, almost daily, an extra hour of serious comedy. For whom did we not semi-slaughter then? Archibald MacLeish, fully; T.S. Eliot -- sparingly; Ezra Pound -- by the ounce; and almost all of the fashionable Fugitives in their Southern mansions of spiritual meandering. Whom did we accept? Not too many regional aesthetes gone agricultural; nor, for that matter, most of

the ragers amid the Radical Muse. We liked and we did not-- and our likes were as personal as they were, with some essential shouting, soon public. We had known the Revolution Of The Word in all of its dappled vests -- and too often it was just so much linguistic mayhem -- like today's fulminations and furies.

These poems by Briggs are of another time and another physical presence; before all the non-acceptable solutions and pollutions fogged our political and moral senses; when thought and emotion and style had the essence needed for more than Mencken's "barbaric yawp" -- to call itself poetry; when colleges were for studying and not for scholarly dynamiters blowing up their libraries as self-hating partisans of amateur anarchism. Harold and I hated every aspect of fascism, in and out of books. Today, using a more contemporary form of rhetoric-in-action, there are poets who salute it, unconsciously, in their mindlessness and malice.

But these poems say it all -- as Briggs' epitaph for all of us -- and for a time called TOMORROW. I quote one poem here that establishes some of our mutuality of another time:

I SAW

Joe Gould, the "pixy seagull"
bumming butts on Sheridan Sq;
creaking his "poems" from bar to bar,
all night prisoner in LIFE Cafeteria,
coffee-drunk, waiting for Jake Spencer
to spring him with a dime. (Minimum check
15 cents)

The Oral History, greatest hoax of our time.
"Who killed the Dial?
I, said Joe Gould,
with my inimitable style,
I killed the Dial."

Why carp about truth.

He gave us a legend:
the clue in Charlie Chan's moustache,
the feud with Bodenheim, Ben Hecht,
the Tomato Epic, bed bugs, sonnets,
notebooks full of street corner myths.
He passed like Ern Malley,
Hot Afternoons in Montana,
Isadora's beauty, General Booth.
He lives in the heart of the Village
where reality meets the twilight zone
and unicorns are common as poets.